

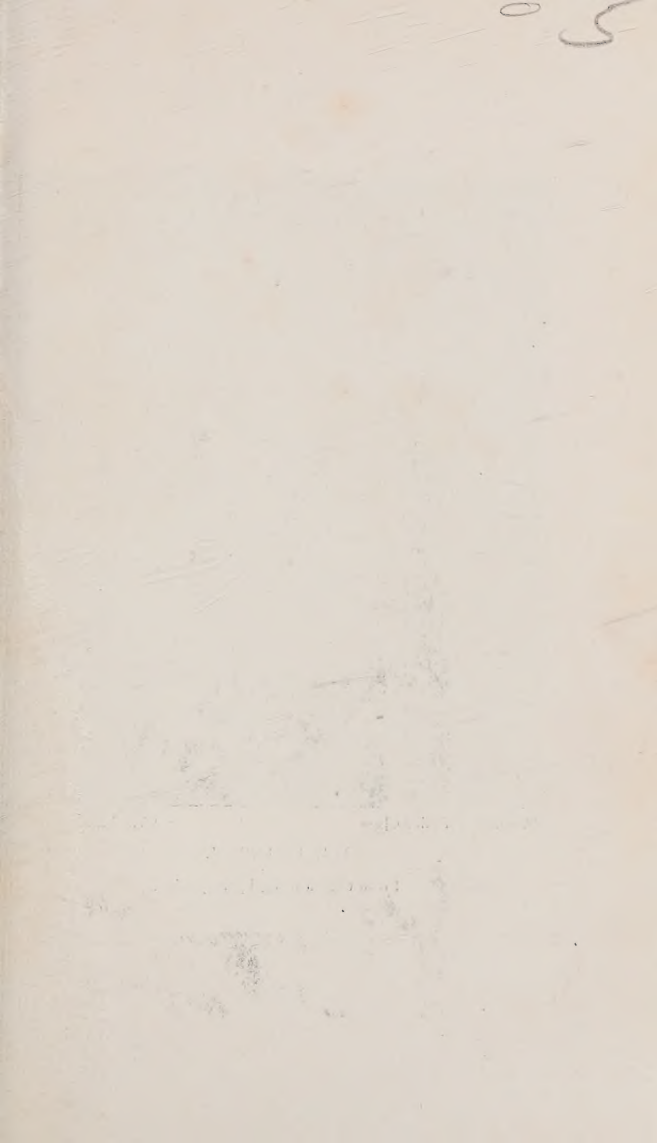
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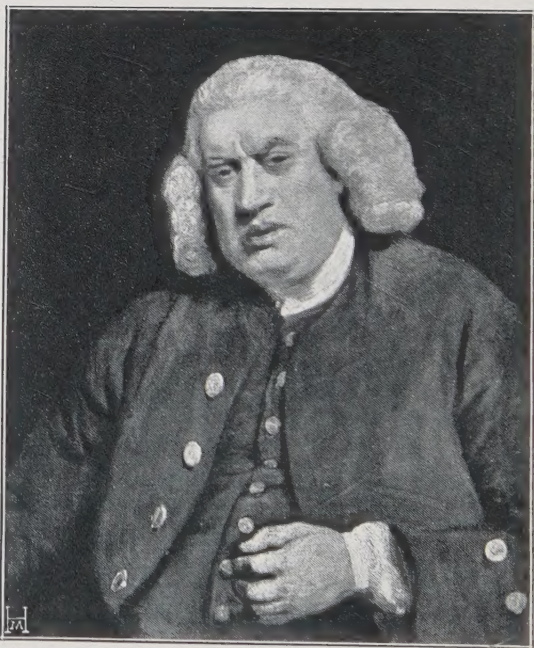
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DR. JOHNSON.

From the painting by Reynolds.

Bell's Miniature Series of Great Writers

DR. JOHNSON

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LONDON
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1905

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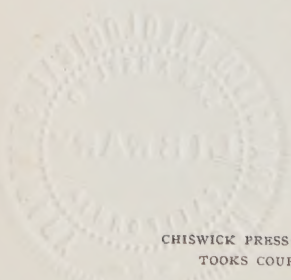
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SAMUEL JOHNSON

HIS LIFE

AS an author, Samuel Johnson, while living, ranked with the most illustrious writers of his century, and although his works have lost much of their reputation, he is better known to us than he was to his contemporaries. Every lover of literature is familiar with the "Great Chamber of Literature," and with the famous Club over which he ruled as dictator. The way in which this immortality is secured forms a paradox in literary history. Many a notable man has been buried a second time by his biographer, but Johnson may be said to owe to Boswell another and ampler life. How well he understood the art of the biographer is seen from his reply to Hannah More, who begged him to show some tenderness to the foibles of their friend: "I will not," he said, "cut off his claws, nor make a tiger a cat, to please anybody." Thanks to his wonderful skill, there is no man of letters, of his own or of any century, with whom we can live on such friendly terms; nor is there one, unless it be Sir Walter Scott, whose companionship is more delightful. Moreover, the bulk of the work adds to its attractive-

ness; we cannot have too much of Johnson, and it may be hoped that this brief sketch will send the reader, with a keener zest, to the feast of wisdom and of wit, flavoured occasionally by the exquisite folly of the writer, stored up in Boswell's pages.

It is not true, as Macaulay asserted, that Boswell was a man of the meanest and feeblest intellect. No such intellect could have produced a consummate work of art, which the Essayist acknowledged the Life to be. Boswell knew from the outset what he designed to do, and did it to the admiration of the world. But the book, strange to say, could not have been written by a man of high character, or even by a man possessing the self-respect which is common in Society. "Bozzy," as he was familiarly called, never objected to making a fool of himself. He was constantly saying or doing foolish things, and had no sense of shame in publishing his folly. No rebuff daunted him for long, and probably it was due to his irrepressible good humour that a place was found for this strange guest in intellectual society. Some quality there must have been better than that of the mere hero-worshipper that made him not only tolerable but even dear to Johnson; and we are reaping the reward of that tolerance.

Samuel Johnson, who was born in Lichfield on the 18th September, 1709, may be said to have been cradled in a library. His father, Michael Johnson, a highly respected bookseller, and magistrate, "propagated learning all over the



THE HOUSE IN WHICH JOHNSON WAS BORN,
MARKET PLACE, LICHFIELD.

From a drawing by Clarkson Stanfield, R.A.

diocese." He read much, and knew much about books, but did not understand the art of selling them, for when he died all the money he could leave his son was a pittance of twenty pounds. Unfortunately he left him also an unhealthy, though powerful, body, and a "vile melancholy" that haunted him through life. The infant was afflicted with scrofula, and at the age of two years was taken up to London to be touched by Queen Anne.

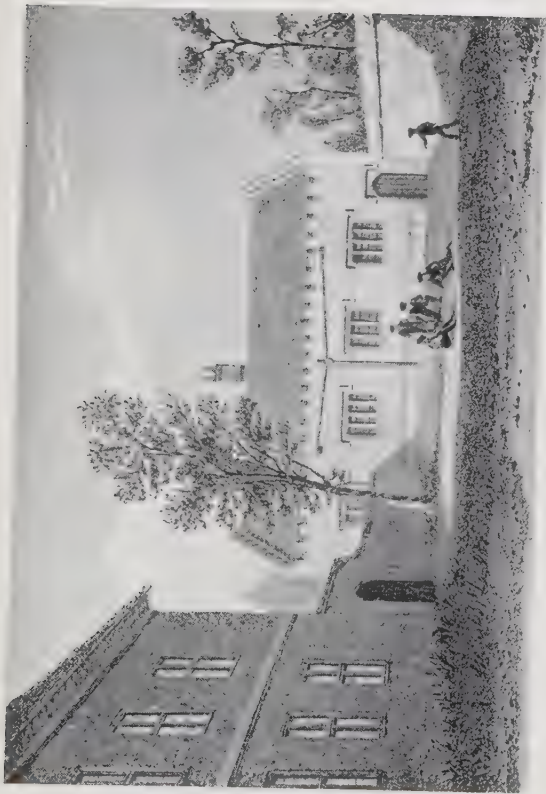
At school, after the fashion of the time, Johnson had Latin whipped into him, but he scarcely needed such a stimulus, for the faculty of acquisition was early developed, and his father regarded him as a prodigy. Leaving school at sixteen, two years were spent, but not idly, at home; for he said in later days, that he knew almost as much at eighteen as he did at fifty-three. In 1728 he began residence at Pembroke College, where he astonished his tutor by quoting Macrobius. As a Christmas exercise he translated Pope's "Messiah" into Latin verse, and did it so well as to make his name known in the University. Pope also is said to have praised it highly.

There he remained three years, and there he had his first experience of the misery endured by a proud man, as poor as he was proud. His ability was acknowledged; and in any revolt against established authority, the future Tory and orthodox churchman was the leader of the mutiny. "I was miserably poor," he said afterwards, "and thought to fight my way by my literature

and my wit." But his poverty was an "unconquerable bar." The outward and visible signs of it cut him to the quick; and when a well-meaning friend placed a new pair of shoes at his door, he flung them out of the window. It was in this time of distress that he read Law's "Serious Call," and found its arguments unanswerable. "This," he says, "was the first occasion of my thinking in earnest of religion, after I became capable of rational inquiry." Driven by sheer want, Johnson left his college in 1731, without a degree; and Pembroke, which did nothing, and perhaps could do nothing, for her famous son in life, has honoured herself by placing his effigy over her gates.

A long and weary servitude had now to be endured, and the record of Johnson's life up to his fifty-third year is one of ceaseless struggle borne without complaint. To gain a livelihood he accepted the post of usher in a school at Market-Bosworth, but escaped in a few months as from a prison house. Thence he went to Birmingham, living for a while under the hospitable roof of an old schoolfellow, and earning a few pounds from the booksellers. In this indigent condition, and with the boldness that often accompanies an empty purse, Johnson fell in love with Mrs. Porter, a widow, old enough to be his mother.¹ "It was a love affair on both sides,"

¹ With the wife Johnson gained also a step-daughter, to whom, according to some reports, he had, like Harry Esmond, made love before winning the mother. If so he was hardly kind to his ancient flame by hinting in later



THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL, LICHFIELD.

From a drawing by John Buckler.

he said ; and when seventeen years afterwards his "Tetty" died, the loss almost broke his heart. The lady had a little money, which was expended in fitting up an academy for young gentlemen; the venture proved a failure, for the school had never more than three pupils. One of the three was David Garrick, and when the school was given up, master and pupil went to London to seek their fortunes. "That was the day," he once said in a pretty large company, "when I came to London with twopence-halfpenny in my pocket;" Garrick overhearing him, exclaimed, "Eh, what do you say, with twopence-halfpenny in your pocket?" "Why, yes, when I came to London with twopence-halfpenny in *my* pocket, and thou, Davy, with three-halfpence in *thine*!" It may be added that Johnson had also in his pocket a partly written tragedy which Garrick afterwards brought upon the stage.

Of those early days little is known beyond what escaped from Johnson in later life. On one occasion, recalling what he had suffered, the strong man burst into tears. No galley-slave could have been bound to the oar more closely than he was to the booksellers, his chief employer being Edward Cave, the proprietor of "The Gentleman's Magazine." Sometimes he was on the verge of starvation; one of his letters is signed with the dismal word *impransus*, and we are told how, when too poor to pay for a lodging, he spent the night walking with his impecunious friend Savage years that her "resplendent excellences" were "a little discoloured by hoary virginity."

round St. James's Square, and that they kept themselves warm by their patriotism. When he had a little money in his purse he "dined for eightpence, with very good company, at the Pine Apple in New Street, near the Strand." No doubt he understood but too well the expedients recommended by an acquaintance, "Threepence laid out at a coffee-house would enable him to pass some hours a day in good company, dinner might be had for sixpence, bread-and-milk breakfast for a penny, and supper was superfluous. On clean-shirt day you might go abroad and pay visits." Sixpences, Johnson once said, were scarce with him in those days, and, unlike most of his Grub Street associates, he had a wife to support. His want of pence must be borne in mind if we would form a just idea of his character. A man who for thirty years or more was liable to be locked up in sponging-houses, and who in the interests of literature had been forced to use his fist—do we not all know that he knocked down his bookseller, Osborne, with a folio?—was not likely to escape from the conflict without scars; and his roughness and occasional want of consideration for the minor courtesies of life may be traced to this cause.

At the age of twenty-nine Johnson escaped from the herd of literary hacks by the publication of "London" (1738), an imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal, which brought him fame and the contemptible sum of ten guineas. At that period the publication of the debates in Parliament was not permitted, but Johnson, who

had now become a regular contributor to the "Gentleman's Magazine," published from notes (1740-1743) under the title of the "Senate of Lilliput," a report of the speeches, which was probably half truth, half fiction. "I took care," he said, "that the Whig dogs should not have the best of it." When at a dinner, a speech of Pitt's was praised as superior to anything in Demosthenes, Johnson observed, "I wrote that speech in a garret in Exeter Street." On finding that these debates were treated as genuine, he brought them to an end, saying that he would not be accessory to the propagation of falsehood.

In these years of patient poverty Johnson was slowly building up his reputation. In 1744 appeared his life of Richard Savage, "an Earl's son, a shoemaker's apprentice, who had seen life in all its forms, who had feasted among blue ribbands in St. James's Square, and had lain with fifty pounds' weight of irons on his legs in the condemned ward of Newgate."¹ Lord Macaulay adds with truth that this little biography is a masterpiece, and that no finer specimen existed in any language living or dead. Three years later he undertook to produce a colossal work for the booksellers, for the very inadequate compensation of £1575; this was the English Dictionary, with which his name is popularly associated. In this labour he was forced during the greater part of seven or eight years to

¹ Macaulay.

employ several assistants. The plan of the work was addressed to Lord Chesterfield, Secretary of State, of whom there will be more to say later on. In 1749 "The Vanity of Human Wishes" won an appreciation for the poet which has not wholly died out in recent days. In the same year, Garrick, whose good nature got the better of his judgement, produced "Irene" at Drury Lane. The tragedy, although a failure, ran for nine nights, and put money in the author's purse. It may be commended to any reader who wishes to inflict a penance on himself for feasting too freely in the world of letters. On being asked how he felt on the ill-success of this long cherished work, he answered, "Like the Monument!"

And now, stirred up, doubtless, by the success of earlier as well as contemporary periodicals, Johnson started "The Rambler," single handed (March 1750), and carried it on for two years. The cost was twopence, and it appeared every Tuesday and Saturday. The exquisite humour of Addison, the liveliness and pathos of Steele, were denied to Johnson as an Essayist, and the sale was very small. The "Rambler" demanded patient readers, and these, when published in book form, it afterwards secured. The age had a vast regard for morality in *print*, and the Essays brought the writer fame, but it came at a time when that which would have given its chief zest to praise had been taken from him. Three days after the publication of the last "Rambler" Mrs. Johnson died. "The man who has passed through such a trial knows well that whatever may be in

store for him in the dark future it can have no heavier blow in reserve.”¹

Johnson was too wise to be idle under the pressure of this great sorrow. In 1755 he received the degree of M.A. from the University of Oxford, and in the same year the Dictionary appeared. Seven years had gone by since the plan was sent to the Earl of Chesterfield, who seems not only to have neglected Johnson but to have repulsed him from his door. When, however, the work approached completion, two papers were printed in “The World,” a rather brilliant periodical of the time, praising Johnson and treating him as a dictator of the language. They were written by Chesterfield, who “fell a-scribbling,” to quote Johnson’s phrase, in the hope that the *magnum opus* would be dedicated to him. The advance was rejected with the contempt that it deserved. Never did the famous Earl appear more despicable, or the poor man of letters more dignified, than in this famous letter.

To the Right Honourable The Earl of Chesterfield.

February 7, 1755.

My Lord,

I have been lately informed by the proprietor of “The World,” that two papers, in which my “Dictionary” is recommended to the public, were written by your Lordship. To be so distinguished is an honour which, being so very little accustomed to favours from the great, I know not well how to receive, or in what terms to acknowledge.

¹ Leslie Stephen.

When, upon some slight encouragement, I first visited your Lordship, I was overpowered, like the rest of mankind, by the enchantment of your address, and could not forbear to wish that I might boast myself *Le vainqueur du vainqueur de la terre*, that I might obtain that regard for which I saw the world contending; but I found my attendance so little encouraged, that neither pride nor modesty would suffer me to continue it. When I had once addressed your Lordship in public I had exhausted all the art of pleasing which a retired and uncourtly scholar can possess. I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little.

Seven years, my Lord, have now past since I waited in your outward rooms, and was repulsed from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it, at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a Patron before.

The shepherd in Virgil grew at last acquainted with Love, and found him a native of the rocks.

Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the public should consider me as owing that to a Patron which Providence has enabled me to do for myself.

Having carried on my work thus far with so little obligation to any favourer of learning, I shall not be disappointed though I should conclude it, if less be possible, with less ; for I have been long awakened from that dream of hope, in which I once boasted myself with so much exultation, my Lord, Your Lordship's most humble, most obedient servant,
SAM. JOHNSON.

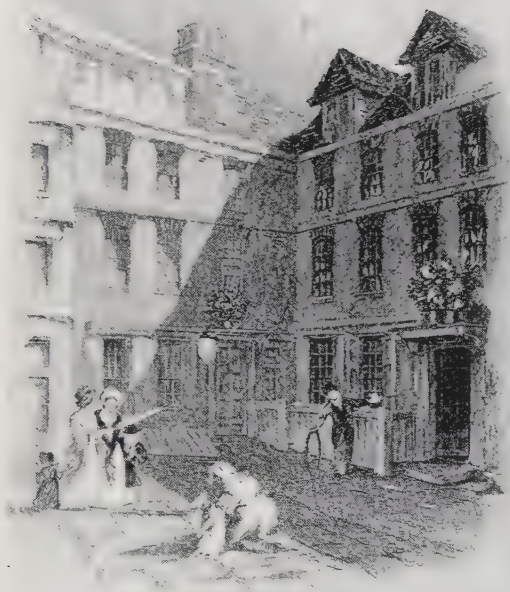
After the last sheet of the Dictionary had been carried to the publisher Johnson asked the messenger, "What did he say?" "Sir, he said, 'Thank God I have done with him!'" "I am glad," was the rejoinder, "that he thanks God for anything."

Having completed the "Dictionary" Johnson seems to have rested awhile on his oars. Few men ever enjoyed idleness more thoroughly, and he would have laughed at Sir Walter Scott's wise maxim, "Never to be doing nothing." No author, Johnson declared, will ever write except for money, and probably his lethargic nature would not have been sufficiently stirred up without such an incentive. He could not afford to be idle long; after the publication of the "Dictionary" he had been twice arrested for debt, and for freedom, as well as daily bread, he was dependent on his pen. In 1758 he started "The Idler," a worthy successor to "The Rambler," less weighty indeed, but more lively. For this series of essays, which appeared in "The Universal Chronicle, or Weekly Gazette," Johnson had some assistance from Thomas Warton, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Bennet Langton, a young man of wealth and

learning, who came to London chiefly for the sake of Johnson's society.

In the following year his mother, "the best mother and the best woman in the world," died at the age of ninety; and to pay the funeral expenses, and some little debts, Johnson wrote "Rasselas." He told Sir Joshua Reynolds that he composed it "in the evenings of one week, sent it to the press in portions as it was written, and had never since read it over." One hundred and twenty-five pounds was all Johnson received for a work that became sufficiently popular to be translated into the principal languages of Europe. It is remarkable that Voltaire's "Candide," a tale written on similar lines, but with a different moral, appeared about the same time, yet it was certain that neither author could have borrowed from the other.

Hitherto, notwithstanding his reputation, he had never been free from the *res angusta domi*, but soon after the accession of George III he was offered and accepted a pension of three hundred pounds. That his definition of a pension as "pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country" should be thrown in his teeth, was inevitable; but he laughed the imputation to scorn, and wished the noise twice as loud and the pension twice as great. "I think," he said, "that the pleasure of cursing the House of Hanover and drinking King James's health are amply overbalanced by three hundred pounds a year." Johnson had long ceased to be a Jacobite, and when, in 1767, George III honoured him with



JOHNSON'S HOUSE.

JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET.

From a drawing by J. Smith.

an interview, he spoke of the way in which he had been received with evident pride and pleasure. "I find it does a man good," he said, "to be talked to by his sovereign." The King asked if he was writing anything, and on his replying that he had done his part as a writer, "I should have thought so too," said the King, "if you had not written so well." "No man," said Johnson, "could have paid a higher compliment." And when asked if he had replied, he added, "No, sir, when the King had said it, it was to be, it was not for me to bandy civilities with my Sovereign."

The most significant event of Johnson's life, though it seemed trivial enough at the time, occurred on the 16th of May, 1763, when Boswell, a young Scottish law student, first met in a book-seller's back parlour the great man whom he was destined to immortalize. "Mr. Davies," Boswell writes, "mentioned my name, and respectfully introduced me to him. I was much agitated, and recollecting his prejudice against the Scotch, of which I had heard much, I said to Davies, 'don't tell where I come from.' 'From Scotland,' cried Davies roguishly. 'Mr. Johnson,' said I, 'I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it!'. . . This speech was somewhat unlucky, for with that quickness of wit for which he was so remarkable, he seized the expression 'come from Scotland,' which I used in the sense of being of that country, and as if I had said that I had come away from it or left it, retorted, 'That, Sir, I find is what a very great many of

your countrymen cannot help!" Another not ill-merited repulse shortly afterwards would have silenced most men, but Boswell had the invincible courage of a hero-worshipper, and even ventured before many days had passed to "beard the Giant in his den." "He received me very courteously; but, it must be confessed, that his apartment, and furniture, and morning dress, were sufficiently uncouth. His brown suit of clothes looked very rusty; he had on a little old shrivelled unpowdered wig, which was too small for his head; his shirt-neck and knees of his breeches were loose; his black worsted stockings ill-drawn up; and he had a pair of unbuckled shoes by way of slippers. But all these slovenly particularities were forgotten the moment that he began to talk."

Careless and indifferent to appearances as Johnson was, he neither despised money nor dress, and was aware that a man with a good coat on his back meets with a better reception than he who has a bad one. "In civilized society," he said, "personal merit will not serve you so much as money will; sir, you may make the experiment. Go into the street and give one man a lecture on morality and another a shilling, and see which will respect you most."

The friendship between the philosopher and his eager disciple grew rapidly: "Come to me as often as you can," he said, "and I shall be glad to see you." A supper at the Mitre, and a couple of bottles of port cemented the strange friendship. "Sir," said Johnson, "I love the

young dogs of this age." That night at the Mitre was quickly followed by another; and when Boswell complained to a friend that drinking port and sitting up late affected his nerves, the answer was, "One had better be palsied at eighteen than not keep company with such a man." And later on Johnson was heard to say, "If I were to lose Boswell it would be a limb amputated."

In 1749, while engaged on the Dictionary, Johnson had started a small Club for literary discussion, in Ivy Lane, Paternoster Row; but it was not until 1764 that the famous Club was founded which afterwards became known as the Literary Club. The original members, nine in number, met at the Turk's Head, Gerard Street, Soho; and there, with men like Burke, Goldsmith, Reynolds, and at a later period, Garrick, as his co-mates, Johnson discovered, if indeed he had not known it before, that "a tavern chair was the throne of human felicity." One of the original members was Sir John Hawkins, "a very unclubable man," who lived to write a pretentious biography, which Boswell was destined to extinguish.

The Club and its members has been thus happily described by Lord Macaulay: "Goldsmith was the representative of poetry and light literature, Reynolds of the arts, Burke of political eloquence and political philosophy. There, too, were Gibbon, the greatest historian, and Jones the greatest linguist of the age. Garrick brought to the meetings his inexhaustible pleasantry, his incomparable mimicry, and his consummate know-

ledge of stage effect. Among the most constant attendants were two high-born and high-bred gentlemen, closely bound together by friendship, but of widely different characters and habits; Bennet Langton, distinguished by his skill in Greek literature, by the orthodoxy of his opinions, and by the sanctity of his life; and Topham Beauclerk, renowned for his amours, his knowledge of the gay world, his fastidious taste, and his sarcastic wit. To predominate over such a society was not easy. Yet even over such a society Johnson predominated. Burke might indeed have disputed the supremacy to which others were under the necessity of submitting. But Burke, though not generally a very patient listener, was content to take the second part when Johnson was present; and the club itself, consisting of so many eminent men, is to this day popularly designated as Johnson's Club."

In 1765, after nine years' delay, much to the irritation of his subscribers, and stirred up probably by a sneer from Churchill:

He for subscribers baits his hook
And takes their cash,
But where's the book?

Johnson brought out his edition of Shakespeare. In the same year he obtained the degree of LL.D. from Trinity College, Dublin, and here it may be observed that it was not until ten years later, when Johnson was sixty-six, that his own university conferred on him the degree of D.C.L.

A little later, he made the acquaintance of a

family with whom his whole life was closely and happily linked for more than sixteen years. Mr. Thrale, a wealthy brewer, and Member of Parliament for Southwark, had an estate at Streatham, presided over by his young wife, a brilliant and warm-hearted woman. By both husband and wife Johnson's fascination was felt, and after being welcomed as a guest, he was asked to become one of the family. Henceforth, whenever it pleased him to escape from Fleet Street, and from the strange family he had brought together in Bolt Court, he was secure of a welcome under that hospitable roof. "Nothing could be more fortunate for Johnson than this connection. He had at Mr. Thrale's, all the comforts, and even luxuries of life, his melancholy was diverted, and his irregular habits lessened by association with an agreeable and well-ordered family. He was treated with the utmost respect, and even affection. The vivacity of Mrs. Thrale's literary talk roused him to cheerfulness and exertion, even when they were alone. But this was not often the case; for he found here a constant succession of what gave him the highest enjoyment, the society of the learned, the witty, and the eminent in every way, who were assembled in numerous companies, called forth his wonderful powers, and gratified him with admiration, to which no man could be insensible."¹

In these crowning years of his fame, his company was largely sought after, and at Streatham,

¹ Boswell.

as Fanny Burney relates, he was consulted, petted, and the observed of all observers.

He was sixty-eight when the author of "Evelina" met him, and her first impressions of the great man are recorded in her diary: "He is, indeed, very ill-favoured; is tall and stout; but stoops terribly; he is almost bent double. His mouth is almost constantly opening and shutting, as if he was chewing. He has a strange method of frequently twirling his fingers, and twisting his hands. His body is in continual agitation, *see-sawing* up and down; his feet are never a moment quiet; and, in short, his whole person is in *perpetual motion*. His dress, too, considering the times, and that he had meant to put on his *best becomes*, being engaged to dine in a large company [at Mrs. Montagu's], was as much out of the common road as his figure; he had a large wig, snuff-colour coat, and gold buttons, but no ruffles to his shirt, doughty fists, and black worsted stockings. He is shockingly near-sighted, and did not, till she held out her hand to him, even know Mrs. Thrale." Fanny was soon bewitched by his talk, forgot his eccentricities, felt the goodness of his heart, and came to love him well.

Johnson's friendships were sincere and lasting, and it was his constant effort to keep them in repair. "Every old friend," says Jeremy Taylor, "was new once, and if he be worthy, keep the new one till he become old." This wise counsel was followed by Johnson. He thought a day lost in which he did not make a new ac-

quaintance, but the new did not supersede the old. "A friendship of twenty years," he wrote to his mistress (as he loved to call Mrs. Thrale), "is interwoven with the texture of life; a friend may be often found and lost, but an *old friend* never can be found, and nature has provided that he cannot easily be lost."

Johnson's personal characteristics are well known to most readers, too well known it may be said, for they have been sometimes dwelt upon with a minuteness of detail that has thrown higher qualities into the shade. His actions betrayed at times a lack of sanity, and there were hours and days of depression in which he seems to have encountered the foul fiend Apollyon and Giant Despair to boot.

This melancholy led him to take the morbid view of life that colours all his writings, but instead of prompting him, as in Cowper's case, to withdraw from society, he sought to find a relief in it from the burden of his thoughts. Few wise men have loved solitude so little. For physical pleasures he had the keenest relish, and was not ashamed to confess his zest for good living. "He who does not mind his belly," he said, "will hardly mind anything else." When he drank wine he took it in large quantities, and, on giving up alcohol, showed his passion for excess as "a hardened and shameless tea drinker, who with tea amused the evenings, with tea solaced the midnight, and with tea welcomed the morning." Mrs. Thrale, whose kindness as a hostess must have been sorely tried, would sometimes sit up

until 4 a. m. to supply his insatiable thirst. And it was not only as a tea drinker that he must have proved an exacting guest. "I, madam, who live at a variety of good tables, am a much better judge of cookery than any person who has a very tolerable cook but lives much at home." Such was Johnson's greeting to a lady at whose house he was to sup. On another occasion he was so displeased with the performances of a French cook that he exclaimed with vehemence: "I'd throw such a rascal into the river!"—a feat he was well able to perform, for Boswell relates that one night at the play, a man having declined to give up a chair which belonged to Johnson, the sage tossed both man and chair into the pit.

His animal life, despite many ailments, was as vigorous as his force of intellect, and he was not prone to conceal any of his gifts. He objected to hunting on the strange plea that it did not take a man out of himself, but Mrs. Thrale states that he would follow the hounds fifty miles on end, and was pleased to be told that he rode as well as the most illiterate fellow in England! No matter where he was, on the Thames in a wherry, in a stage coach, at Ranelegh, or Vauxhall, at his club, or in a coffee-house, he made his presence felt. We are told of his running a race in his old age with a young lady and winning it, and how upon being called up at 3 o'clock in the morning by his friends Beauclerk and Langton, he greeted them with "What, is it *you*, you dogs! I'll have a frisk with you!" and a merry frisk it was, as all readers of Boswell know.

“Dr. Johnson,” said Fanny Burney, “has more fun, and comical humour, and love of nonsense than almost anybody I ever saw;” and Hannah More writes of having a headache one morning “after raking out so late with that gay libertine Johnson.” “I never knew a man laugh more heartily,” is the report of Boswell; and Garrick says that “he gives you a forcible hug and shakes laughter out of you whether you will or no.”

His love of truth was great, but he was a humorist, and, like Carlyle, delighted in strong language; “I sometimes say more than I mean in jest,” he said, “and people are apt to believe me serious.” We must not suppose, therefore, that he really believed every bad man to be a Whig, all foreigners fools, or King William one of the most worthless scoundrels that ever lived. It was easier to say generally that a man who did not agree with him in politics or creed was an unmitigated rascal, than to discuss the points of disagreement, and so Johnson said it. He did not understand how a man could be offended by rough words; but on one or two occasions, after being more forgetful than usual of the courtesies of society, he was known to apologize; and it is recorded that on offending Sir Joshua Reynolds, he was even seen to blush. Johnson looked upon himself as a good-humoured fellow, and this, no doubt, he was; his harsh words were said off-hand, and forgotten probably as soon as uttered; but with what is truest in man or woman, he was almost invariably sympathetic.

“Early in life,” said Hannah More, “I was

much captivated by the piety of the Jansenists, and one day spoke of them with enthusiastic admiration to Dr. Johnson. This called forth all his terrors. For the first and only time he broke out upon me in a voice of thunder: 'Madame, let me hear no more of this; don't quote your popish authorities to me; I want none of your popery!' I was overwhelmed by the shock, and he saw it. His countenance instantly changed, his lips quivered, and his eyes filled with tears; he took my hand, and, in a tone of the gentlest emotion, he said, 'Child' (his usual address to me), 'never mind what I have said; follow true piety wherever you can find it.' "

Ursa Major had, as Goldsmith said, nothing of the bear but his skin; but it is only with limitations we can accept his claim to be "well-bred to a degree of needless scrupulosity."

In his religious views Johnson's "scrupulosity" savoured of superstition. He was charitable to men whose lives were dissolute if their opinions were correct; and praised the piety of a man who although he never entered a church always took off his hat upon passing one; "this shows," he said, "that he has good principles." He was himself very irregular in church attendance, but was careful not to correct a proof or to take milk in his tea on Good Friday; and at penitential seasons uttered many lamentations over his shortcomings, among which lying in bed in the morning takes a prominent place.

His respect for the dignitaries of the church was very great, and a friend who saw him pre-

sented to the Archbishop of York, described his bow "as such a studied elaboration of homage, such an extension of limb, such a flexion of the body, as have seldom or ever been equalled."

By him through a long period of his life God was more feared as a Judge than beloved as a Father, and it is characteristic of his open nature that he did not shrink from expressing his fears even in society. His sincerity and devotional fervour are, however, as evident as his constitutional depression. He began no work without prayer, and a reverence for what was pure and holy marks his life and gives the tone to his works.

In the piety which showed itself in saintly deeds, Johnson never failed. One night he found a suffering woman in the streets, carried her home on his back, ministered like a good angel to her wants, and endeavoured to start her in a better way of life. In disregard of political economists he gave freely to beggars; and on finding little children asleep on doorsteps at night, put pennies into their hands to provide a breakfast. No man had a greater contempt for the superficial sorrows of society, or a warmer sympathy for the griefs that try the heart. Sentimental people, he said, pay you by feeling. "Clear your *mind* of cant," was his advice to Boswell. "You may talk as other people do, you may say to a man, 'Sir, I am your humble servant.' You are not his humble servant. You may say these are bad times; it is a melancholy thing to be reserved to such times. You don't

mind the times. You tell a man, 'I am sorry you had such bad weather the last day of your journey, and were so much wet.' You don't care sixpence whether he is wet or dry. You may *talk* in this manner; it is a mode of talking in society; but don't *think* foolishly."

Boswell does not hide his own faults when recording the counsels of his hero. "Once" (he writes), "when checking my boasting too frequently of myself in company, he said to me: 'Boswell, you often vaunt so much as to provoke ridicule. You put me in mind of a man who was standing in the kitchen of an inn with his back to the fire, and thus accosted the person next him: 'Do you know, sir, who I am?' 'No, sir,' said the other, 'I have not that advantage.' 'Sir,' said he, 'I am the great Twalmley who invented the New Floodgate Iron!'"

Garrick's brother called Johnson a tremendous companion, but he was a man whose roughness and dogmatism were tempered by the utmost tenderness of heart. "He loved the poor," says Mrs. Thrale, "as I never saw anyone else do." And this love was expressed not by almsgiving alone, but by daily self-denial. Not only was two-thirds of his pension spent in charity, but the lame, the halt, and the blind found a permanent home under his roof in Bolt Court. The family consisted of three ladies and of Levett, a poor apothecary who lives in Johnson's "In Memoriam"; and it was far from a happy family. "Williams," he told Mrs. Thrale, "hates everybody, Levett hates Desmoulins and does not



JAMES BOSWELL,
From a sketch by George Langton.

love Williams, Desmoulins hates them both; Poll (Miss Carmichael) loves none of them." Frank, Johnson's negro servant, appears to have been a worthy fellow. He was a legacy from his master's *dear, dear Bathurst*, "a man to his very heart's content;" and coming from such a friend was sure to be treated with kindness.

Carlyle, in a letter to Erskine of Linlathen, confides to his care a poor old woman as one of the most venerable human figures known to him in the world. "The world has not many shrines to a devout man at present, and perhaps in our own section of it there are few objects holding more authentically of heaven and an unseen 'better world' than the pious loving soul and patient heavy-laden life of this poor old venerable woman."

A like tenderness of feeling was felt by Johnson for an aged servant who had known him from his childhood, and his asperities are forgiven when we see him by the dying bed of Kitty Chambers:

Sunday, October 18, 1767.—Yesterday, October 17, at about ten in the morning, I took my leave for ever of my dear old friend, Catherine Chambers, who came to live with my mother about 1724, and has been but little parted from us since. . . . I desired all to withdraw, then told her that we were to part for ever; that as Christians we should part with prayer; and that I would, if she was willing, say a short prayer beside her. She expressed great desire to hear me; and held up her poor hands, as she lay in bed, with great fervour while I prayed, kneeling by her. . . . I then kissed her. She told me

that to part was the greatest pain that she had ever felt, and that she hoped we should meet again in a better place. I expressed, with swelled eyes, and great emotion of tenderness, the same hopes. We kissed and parted, I humbly hope, to meet again and to part no more.

Whatever Johnson deemed right, that at any cost he would do, and one act of contrition recorded by him, whether it be considered a wise act or not, displays a manly courage that shrunk from no self-sacrifice:

Once indeed (said he), I was disobedient: I refused to attend my father to Uttoxeter market. Pride was the source of that refusal, and the remembrance of it was painful. A few years ago I desired to atone for this fault. I went to Uttoxeter in very bad weather, and stood for a considerable time bare-headed in the rain on the spot where my father's stall used to stand. In contrition I stood, and I hope the penance was expiatory.

It will be seen that Johnson's piety, although thoroughly sincere and proved by deed and word, was not a little tainted by the melancholy which led him at the least anxious period of his career to write to Mrs. Thrale that his life "had been diversified by misery, spent part in the sluggishness of penury, and part under the violence of pain, in gloomy discontent, or importunate distress."

No friends could have done more than the Thrales to relieve the weight of his depression. To them he turned in sickness and in health, and found their kindness inexhaustible. They

carried the philosopher with them to Brighton and Bath, to Wales and to Paris. In 1773, when Johnson was sixty-four years of age, Boswell allured him to visit Scotland and the Hebrides, a laborious feat in those days; and the appearance of the traveller as he set out from Edinburgh is thus described by his biographer:

“He was now in his sixty-fourth year, and was become a little dull of hearing. His sight had always been somewhat weak; yet so much does mind govern and even supply the deficiency of organs, that his perceptions were uncommonly quick and accurate. His head, and sometimes also his body, shook with a kind of motion like the effect of a palsy; he appeared to be frequently disturbed by cramps, or convulsive contractions, of the nature of that distemper called St. Vitus’s dance. He wore a full suit of plain brown clothes, with twisted hair-buttons of the same colour, a large bushy greyish wig, a plain shirt, black worsted stockings, and silver buckles. Upon his tour, when journeying, he wore boots, and a very wide brown cloth great-coat, with pockets which might have almost held the two volumes of his folio Dictionary; and he carried in his hand a large English oak stick.”

Vastly pleased was Boswell to have secured the great man, as children would say, all to himself. “I compared myself,” he said, “to a dog who has got hold of a large piece of meat and runs away with it to a corner, where he may devour it in peace.”

A narrative of the tour was written with many

lively details, not always to his credit, by Boswell; and with more sobriety by Johnson, who bore the inconveniences of travel with a patience and good humour scarcely to be expected from an old man whose life-vows were given to Fleet Street. In his eyes a mountain was a protuberance; rocks, hills, and waterfalls might, he said, be imagined at home; and "journeys which neither impregnate the imagination nor enlarge the understanding," are but useless labours. To know more of men was to him the sole object of travel; a blade of grass is always a blade of grass. "What is there in Wales," he asks, "that can fill the hunger of ignorance, or quench the thirst of curiosity?" "Let us, if we do talk, talk about something, men and women are my subjects of inquiry, let us see how these differ from those we have left behind." Johnson, however, was honest enough to admit that he "got an acquisition of more ideas" by his visit to the Hebrides than by anything that he could remember. "I saw," he said, "quite a different system of life."

Like Charles Lamb, he loved best the full tide of human existence which he found in London. Blind to the variety of nature and deaf to her voices, he gained all needful food for heart and intellect within range of Charing Cross, and declared that "he who is tired of London is tired of life, since there is in London all that life can afford."

Nowhere but in London could Johnson have found full scope for his greatest gift. As a talker no subject proved amiss: he amazed a dancing-

master by his knowledge of the art. "It is music to hear this man speak," was a Highland chieftain's exclamation, after listening to his description of the process of tanning; he had a ready judgement to deliver upon brewing, prize-fighting, boxing, and on the shape of bull-dogs. In conversation Johnson was aided by a powerful voice, and some impression was no doubt made by what a friend called his *bow-wow* way.

De Quincey asserts, "there is no man that can cite any single error which Dr. Johnson unmasked, or any important truth which he expanded;" and there is some truth in the observation, for he was not a philosopher, nor, in the large sense of the word, a poet; he had neither high inspirations nor new messages to deliver; his assertions were often preposterous, and his conclusions illogical, but when De Quincey adds that Johnson's greatest defect for purposes of conversation was that he had little interest in man, the statement is likely to be questioned by every reader of Boswell.

In the days when mud baths were a fashionable remedy, a small poet, whose friends would not listen to his verses, is said to have inflicted them on the helpless patients; Johnson, although listened to anywhere, liked a coach for a similar reason. The company, he told Mrs. Thrale, were shut in with him there and could not escape as out of a room. Conversation, she writes, was all he required to make him happy, and when he would have tea made at two o'clock in the morning, it was that there might be a certainty of detaining

his companions round him. Yet we are told that Johnson needed to be drawn into conversation, and would sometimes look as if he were half asleep until the remark which aroused him came. "That is the happiest conversation," he said, "where there is no competition, no vanity, but a calm, quiet interchange of sentiments," and he complained that John Wesley was never sufficiently at leisure to fold his legs and converse at ease, but Johnson in his most natural mood was an intellectual gladiator, and liked best the opponent who could give him blow for blow. Burke, the greatest man of the age, was his chief antagonist. "Were I to see that fellow now it would kill me," he said, when suffering from illness; and Burke was content to "ring the bell" to Johnson.

He was indeed ever a fighter, and one famous controversy in which he took a pugilistic part is characteristic of the age and of the man. The publication of "Ossian" in 1762 and 1763 created an excitement rarely called forth by two volumes of verse. Were "Fingal" and "Temora" translations from the Gaelic, as Macpherson maintained, or were they to a large extent, if not wholly, the work of an impostor? The question is not settled to this day; but probably Matthew Arnold is right in saying that make the part of what is forged, modern, tawdry, spurious, as large as you please, "there will still be left in the book a residue with the very soul of the Celtic genius in it." Johnson denied the authenticity of the poems, and said so; he maintained, more-

over, that they had no merit, and that any man, woman, or child could have written them. But what kind of letter from Macpherson led the old man to write the following reply, may be readily conjectured:

Mr. James Macpherson.

I received your foolish and impudent letter. Any violence offered me I shall do my best to repel, and what I cannot do for myself the law shall do for me. I hope I never shall be deterred from detecting what I think a cheat by the menaces of a ruffian.

What would you have me retract? I thought your book an imposture; I think it an imposture still. For this opinion I have given my reasons to the public, which I here dare you to refute. Your rage I defy. Your abilities since your Homer are not so formidable; and what I hear of your morals inclines me to pay regard not to what you shall say, but to what you shall prove. You may print this if you will.

SAM. JOHNSON.

Boswell adds that Johnson provided himself with a stout oak stick, and would doubtless, "old as he was, have made his corporal presence be felt as much as his intellectual." And here it may be mentioned that Foote the comic actor had once proposed to exhibit Johnson on the stage but was restrained by fear. "He knew," said Johnson, "I would have broken his bones, I would have saved him the trouble of cutting off a leg; I would not have left him a leg to cut off!!"

Despite his unattractive, and at times, repulsive manners, Johnson's influence with the better half of mankind was unbounded. Nearly every woman brought into his society felt his power, and yielded to his sway. Even on feminine matters, about which a half-blind philosopher might be supposed indifferent, Johnson's authority was paramount. He declined, when at Lichfield, to walk out with Mrs. Thrale until she had changed her dress, and at Streatham made such severe comments on a lady who had dressed herself for church in a manner he did not like, that she thanked him for his reproof, and hastened to change her gown, much to the amazement of her husband, who could scarcely believe his own eyes.

Not only learned ladies, and blue-stockings, like Mrs. Carter and Hannah More, but women of position in society were known to crowd round his chair as he talked. His wit, indeed, would sometimes get the better of his politeness, as when, on bidding farewell to a very stout young lady who was leaving England for the Continent, he exclaimed "Go, go, my dear, you are too big for an island!" On the other hand, no man was capable of paying a finer compliment than Johnson. On receiving a visit from Mrs. Siddons, and there being for a moment no available chair, "Madam," exclaimed he with a smile, "you who so often occasion a want of seats to other people, will the more readily excuse the want of one yourself."

Johnson's most famous work was written in

his old age. In 1777, forty of the first booksellers in London resolved to publish an edition of the English Poets, beginning with Cowley. A deputation waited on Johnson, with a request that he would supply biographical sketches, and he undertook the task for the small sum of £200, to which a third hundred was afterwards added. At this time Johnson had no superior in the literary world. He could have commanded a large sum for any work he undertook, and he might have exercised an independent judgement in the choice of the men best fitted to be entitled English Poets. It is needless to say that of the fifty-two men classed together as poets in this edition, a considerable number had no claim to that title. But Johnson did not care to contest the wishes of the trade.

“I was somewhat disappointed,” says Boswell, “in finding . . . that he was to furnish a preface and life to any poet the booksellers pleased. I asked him if he would do this to any dunce’s works, if they should ask him? JOHNSON: ‘Yes, sir, and say he was a dunce.’ My friend seemed now not much to relish talking of this edition.”

The closing years of a long life inevitably bring with them losses that cannot be filled up.

Goldsmith, whose epitaph Johnson deemed it a disgrace to write in English, died in 1774; Garrick, whose death eclipsed the gaiety of nations, in 1779; and Beauclerk, as witty a member of the Club as the great actor, in 1780; Levett, his humble and faithful companion for many years, passed away in 1782; and Johnson

left a lasting memorial of his worth in verses, of which the following are the most striking:

Well try'd through many a varying year,
See Levett to the grave descend;
Officious, innocent, sincere,
Of every friendless name, the friend.

In misery's darkest caverns known,
His ready help was ever nigh,
Where hopeless anguish pour'd his groan
And lonely want retired to die.

No summons mock'd by chill delay,
No petty gains disdain'd by pride:
The modest wants of every day
The toil of every day supply'd.

His virtues walk'd their narrow round
Nor made a pause, nor left a void;
And sure the eternal Master found
His single talent well employ'd.

The blind Miss Williams, a lady, according to Johnson, "of universal curiosity and comprehensive knowledge" had lived for many years under his roof, and apparently acted as his house-keeper. She died in 1783, and the old man felt the loneliness of age.

Mr. Thrale had died in 1781, and no death, Johnson wrote, since the death of his wife, had ever oppressed him so much. It was destined, as his prophetic soul probably told him, to effect a complete change in his life. The widow, who was greatly her husband's junior and still in the prime of life, sighed for an affection which she had not found in the wealthy brewer. She fell in love with Piozzi, an Italian musician, and after



SAMUEL JOHNSON.

From a painting at one time in the possession of Archdeacon Cambridge.

suffering much from opposition, married him and spent the rest of her life in Italy. The loss of the familiar companion and of the pleasant home which had sheltered him for nearly twenty years was a painful blow to Johnson. Piozzi was a true gentleman, and proved an affectionate husband; but he was a "fiddler" and a Roman Catholic. Mrs. Thrale had daughters growing into womanhood, and in the eyes of the world such a marriage would be deemed degrading. Degrading Johnson thought it, and personal feelings added weight to his anger. Mrs. Thrale wrote a friendly letter to her old monitor, and received an outrageous reply:

Madam,

If I interpret your letter rightly you are ignominiously married. If it is yet undone let us once more talk together. If you have abandoned your children and your religion God forgive your wickedness. If you have forfeited your fame and your country, may your folly do no further mischief. If the last act is yet to do, I who have loved you, esteemed you, revered you, and served you—I who have long thought you the first of womankind—entreat that before your fate is irrevocable I may once more see you. I was, I once was, Madam, most truly yours,
SAM. JOHNSON.

Johnson's anger is inexcusable, or would be if we did not remember that he was suffering not only from the loss of a happy home and of his dearest friend, but from old age and disease. He had but six months to live, and no doubt hoped that the affectionate nurse who had cared for him

so long and tenderly would soothe his dying hours. After a visit to some old friends in Lichfield, Birmingham and Oxford, he went back to Bolt Court to die, November 16, 1784. It does not appear that he had any female attendant; and of a man who sat up with him one night he said, "Sir, the fellow's an idiot; he's as awkward as a turnspit when first put into the wheel, and as sleepy as a dormouse." In his last hours he was visited by Langton and Windham, Reynolds and Burke; and one day when four or five friends sat round his bed, Burke said: "I am afraid, sir, such a number of us may be oppressive to you." "No sir," said Johnson, "it is not so, and I must be in a wretched state indeed when your company would not be a delight to me." "My dear sir," replied Burke in a tremulous voice, "you have always been too good to me." When the doctor told him that in his opinion he could not recover, "Then," said Johnson, "I will take no more physic, not even my opiates, for I have prayed that I may render up my soul to God unclouded." Fanny Burney, "the dearest of all ladies," when he was too ill to see her, sat weeping on the staircase. There had been a long and affectionate farewell visit on the 25th November, when he asked for her prayers and was touchingly affectionate, and on December 13th he died. "He has made a chasm," said Gerard Hamilton, "which not only nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up. Let us go to the next best. There is nobody; no man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson."

Johnson was buried, as he had hoped to be, in Westminster Abbey, with the recognition due to his high merit; and a statue representing "a half-naked muscular athlete," was raised to his memory in St. Paul's, under which is a Latin inscription by Dr. Parr. There are statues in St. Paul's which serve as a memorial of men who would otherwise be forgotten, but no Englishman requires to visit the great Cathedral in which he so often worshipped, to be reminded of Samuel Johnson.

HIS WORKS

“**T**HAT book is good in vain which the reader throws away; he only is the master who keeps the mind in pleasing captivity, whose pages are perused with eagerness, and in hope of new pleasure are perused again; and whose conclusion is perceived with an eye of sorrow such as the traveller casts upon departing day.”

This fine passage occurs in the “Life of Dryden:” and the question arises whether Johnson’s works, or any one of them, will stand this test. It is interesting to remember that on the day when Pope brought out his “Seventeen Hundred and Thirty-eight, a dialogue something like Horace,” Johnson published his “London,” (an imitation of the third Satire of Juvenal,) in which Pope was so much interested, that he made inquiries about the author, and on hearing that he was an obscure writer, observed, “He will soon be *déterré*.” Pope tried, but without success, to assist him, and on hearing that he had written on his behalf to Lord Gower, Johnson exclaimed, “Who would not be proud to have such a man as Pope solicitous in inquiring about him.” “London,” as Mr. Courthope points out, “was received by the public with even more favour than

Pope's satire." It is a forcible piece of rhetoric, but, unlike any other work of Johnson's, based on insincerity. Juvenal's argument, of course, forced him to applaud the country at the expense of the town, a praise which at no period of his life could the writer have honestly given. In "The Vanity of Human Wishes," on the contrary, written in imitation of the Tenth Satire of Juvenal, and published eleven years later, Johnson had a congenial theme upon which he was ever ready to expatiate. The profound sincerity of this Satire lifts it into a higher atmosphere and suffices to prove that he who knew so much about the poets belonged himself to the fraternity.

The revolt at the close of the eighteenth century against the classical school of poetry, serious and significant though it be, was not wholly productive of good; and Wordsworth, the supreme poet of his age, was chiefly great when forgetting his own theory that the language of the common people sufficed for the poet. But Wordsworth and Coleridge were amply justified in protesting against the poetic diction, which captivated even a true poet like Gray, and led him to call a cat "a hapless nymph," and to translate the trundling of a hoop into "chasing the rolling circle's speed." The error of Johnson's age was to mistake good sense expressed in conventional language, for poetry; perhaps in the present day we have fallen into the opposite extreme, and sought for the highest gift of the poet in the music of his words. To such music Johnson was utterly insensible, and the impression left by his verse is due to the

passionate fervour which caused Byron to pronounce "The Vanity of Human Wishes" "a grand poem;" and Scott to write that "its deep and pathetic morality has often extracted tears from those whose eyes wander dry over pages professedly sentimental." Scott indeed professed his admiration for Johnson's poetry even more strongly, and said he had greater pleasure in reading it than any other poetical composition. The amount of verse composed by Johnson is very small. "London" consists of 263 lines, and "The Vanity of Human Wishes" of 368, yet these short poems, with a prologue on the opening of Drury Lane Theatre, contain golden words that belong to the current coin of literature. Is there any reader or book-lover who does not recognize the following couplets and lines?

He left a name at which the world grew pale,
To point a moral or adorn a tale.

From Marlborough's eyes the streams of dotage flow,
And Swift expires a driveller and a show.

Each change of many-coloured life he drew,
Exhausted worlds and then imagined new.

Superfluous lags the veteran on the stage.

This mournful truth is everywhere confessed,
Slow rises worth by poverty depressed.

There mark what ills the scholar's life assail,
Toil, envy, want, the patron, and the gaol.

There are greater poets than Johnson who
have left fewer lines universally familiar, and in

supposed ~~and~~ (while) the promise of peace and security
I bear the voice of the 17th.

30 Bear the voice of bull, dimly you trace
Shake off K' menaces, off go

Shake off K' embraces of State a moment,
And the Poet is!

And say the waving willows aside

1894. 10. 10. I know of Mrs. Glad
 Steyer, Ottawa, Ont.
 and all Apache but her 13 sons' names.
 I am writing envelopes and.

Not granted — her dowry —

not granted — her dog'd — a softend glance
at such, a black informant him her coolected

I want sleep my steadiness of soul
 Period for the best of me

Turn'd over the page of Plots or of Ballads
Calang'd the thoughts and scribbled 'em.

Enlarged the nursery and palisade the Work
The Green's Whiffer and the Bohner's for
and on 11/11/1911

My symptoms whisper and the Zephyrus' long shape brings
a sympathy with us in every year.

... as in every fair
... awakens ... and further ...
... pines ... *Uphelia* ...

none hinders Affrica Nat. the only
friendship to her rival: Affrica:

To acquire some portable record of Ireland.

— into the private record of Charles coming
to the private garden as it being the home of peace.
— But not to be.

But I shall come.
We have approached each other. But I shall

we then approach each individual ^{in the} under growth of the growth like the rising of a growth.

like the wearing of a bonnet & spend
but differ fashion shall upon my ~~clothes~~

gone cards — gone wife, gone daughter

Embarked these Queens, abdallied, to the Palace - 9 March.

with Beauty with Ashura to vulgar Eyes.

— glutinous Balsa — in this private shade
A Zerkoff's Manger of maple Mice

A Gentle Stranger of Magisthi. Mrs
 Shrobs' admittance to the fair. Speke

man commended to the four Appa-
mipivd, as he says, to take care.

forming March - for all the Bloom of Venus and of Youth.

That trivial incidently determining body! ...
... the my body, though I should ...

From Study Study House at 1000

THE ORIGINAL DRAFT OF DR. JOHNSON'S TYP

THE ORIGINAL DRAFT OF DR. JOHNSON'S TRAGEDY OF "IRENE,"
 TIED AT DRURY LANE IN 1749, IN THE AUTHOR'S OWN HAND.

TED AT DRUKY LANE IN 1749, IN THE AUTHOR'S OWN HAND.

estimating his place as a man of letters, this is a gift which must be placed to his credit. The lines with which Johnson concludes "The Vanity of Human Wishes," may be quoted here. They sum up his philosophy of life, and show that in didactic verse, he can sometimes prove a worthy rival of his master, Pope.

Where then shall Hope and Fear their objects find?
Must dull suspense corrupt the stagnant mind?
Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,
Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?
Must no dislike, alarm, no wishes rise,
No cries invoke the mercies of the skies?
Enquirer, cease; petitions yet remain
Which Heaven may hear, nor deem Religion vain.
Still raise for good the supplicating voice,
But leave to Heaven the measure and the choice.
Safe in his power, whose eyes discern afar
The secret ambush of a specious prayer;
Implore his aid, in his decisions rest,
Secure, whate'er he gives, he gives the best.
Yet, when the sense of sacred presence fires
And strong devotion to the skies aspires,
Pour forth thy fervours for a healthful mind,
Obedient passions and a will resign'd;
For love, which scarce collective man can fill;
For patience, sovereign o'er transmuted ill;
For faith, that, panting for a happier seat,
Counts death kind Nature's signal of retreat.
These goods for man the laws of Heaven ordain,
These goods he grants, who grants the power to gain;
With these celestial Wisdom calms the mind,
And makes the happiness she does not find.

Although Johnson's verse adds a wreath to his fame, his literary reputation is chiefly based upon his prose works.

Of these the first through which he earned a name is "A Dictionary of the English Language."

"The writer of Dictionaries," says Johnson, "is among the unhappy mortals who can hope neither for praise nor reward, all that he can look for is to escape reproach, and even this negative recompense is granted to very few." It is easy to see, however, despite the depressed tone of the Preface, which drew tears from his opponent Horne Tooke, that the lexicographer expected, with no slight assurance, the recompense of fame, and that recompense he received.

In hope of giving longevity to that which its own nature forbids to be immortal, I have devoted this book, the labour of years, to the honour of my country, that we may no longer yield the palm of philology, without a contest, to the nations of the continent. The chief glory of every people arises from its authors: whether I shall add anything by my own writings to the reputation of *English* literature must be left to time: much of my life has been lost under the pressures of disease; much has been trifled away; and much has always been spent in provision for the day that was passing over me; but I shall not think my employment useless or ignoble, if by my assistance foreign nations, and distant ages, gain access to the propagators of knowledge, and understand the teachers of truth; if my labours afford light to the repositories of science, and add celebrity to Bacon, to Hooker, to Milton, and to Boyle. . . .

In this work, when it shall be found that much is omitted, let it not be forgotten that much likewise is performed; and though no book was ever spared out of tenderness to the author, and the world is

little solicitous to know whence proceeded the faults of that which it condemns; yet it may gratify curiosity to inform it, that the "English Dictionary" was written with little assistance of the learned, and without any patronage of the great; not in the soft obscurities of retirement, or under the shelter of academick bowers, but amid inconvenience and distraction, in sickness and in sorrow. It may repress the triumph of malignant criticism to observe that if our language is not here fully displayed, I have only failed in an attempt which no human powers have hitherto completed. If the lexicons of ancient tongues, now immutably fixed, and comprised in a few volumes, be yet, after the toil of successive ages, inadequate and delusive; if the aggregated knowledge, and co-operating diligence of the Italian academicians, did not secure them from the censure of Beni; if the embodied criticks of France, when fifty years had been spent upon their work, were obliged to change its economy, and give their second edition another form, I may surely be contented without the praise of perfection, which, if I could obtain, in this gloom of solitude, what would it avail me? I have protracted my work till most of those whom I wished to please have sunk into the grave, and success and miscarriage are empty sounds; I therefore dismiss it with frigid tranquillity, having little to fear or hope from censure or from praise.

No student of the English language would now regard "Johnson's Dictionary" as a basis for the study, for he knew little of philology, and for his knowledge of the northern languages was almost wholly indebted to two authorities now regarded as obsolete—Junius and Skinner. But despite its obvious deficiencies, the great quarto diction-

ary, which was sufficiently popular to reach the eleventh edition in 1816, is what most dictionaries are not, a work of literature. It shows how much Johnson had read, and the definitions and illustrative passages are characteristic of its author.

“Johnson’s Dictionary,” says Macaulay, “was hailed with an enthusiasm such as no similar work has ever excited. It was indeed the first dictionary that could be read with pleasure. The definitions show so much acuteness of thought and command of language, and the passages quoted from Poets, Divines, and Philosophers are so skilfully selected that a leisure hour may always be very agreeably spent in turning over the pages.”

The definitions, it is almost needless to say, are sometimes amusing, sometimes perverse, and frequently eccentric. Two or three of the more characteristic, but probably also the most familiar, may be here quoted :

Excise.—A hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged, not by the common judges of property, but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid.

Network.—Anything reticulated or decussated at equal distances with interstices between the intersections.

Pension.—An allowance made to anyone without an equivalent. In England it is generally understood to mean—pay, given to a state hireling for treason to his country.

Oats.—A grain which in England is generally

given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people. ("Yes," said Lord Elibank on hearing this definition, "and where else will you see such horses and such men!")

Johnson's artfully balanced and sonorous sentences are not unfitted for subjects that admit of gorgeous rhetoric, and occasionally on rising to eloquence his work is worthy of its elaborate scaffolding, but this is not often the case, for his prose seldom reaches a higher altitude than impregnable good sense. The winged words of such writers as Jeremy Taylor, Milton, and Ruskin give a consciousness to the reader of fresh vitality, but Johnson lacks this invigorating power.

"He who thinks with more extent than other men," he says, "will want words of larger meaning;" but big words do not necessarily imply a corresponding largeness of thought, and his pompous language is used alike for momentous subjects and for the most frivolous incidents. "Why, Dr. Johnson," said Goldsmith in allusion to the fable, "if you were to make little fishes talk, they would talk like whales." How Johnson toiled under the burden of words is perhaps most evident in the "Rambler," a periodical designed, like the "Tatler" and "Spectator," for popular entertainment. The paper published twice a week for two years—1750-1752—was almost wholly Johnson's work, and illustrates his intellectual energy; but the essayist who treats of men and manners in a serial should touch his

subjects lightly, and this the author of the "Rambler" fails to do. The miseries of existence, the vanity of human hopes, the duty of resignation, and the supreme folly of living without forward-looking thoughts, are not themes likely to attract an indifferent reader, and Johnson's inability as an essayist "to come home to men's business and bosoms," accounts for the comparative neglect of the "Rambler" at the time and since.

During the author's lifetime it was, however, only comparative, for although the weekly sale was very small, when collected in volumes the "Rambler" passed through several editions; and one evening at his club Johnson cried out: "Oh, gentlemen, I must tell you a very great thing. The Empress of Russia has ordered the 'Rambler' to be translated into the Russian language, so I shall be read on the banks of the Wolga!" "My other works," Johnson is reported to have said, "are wine and water, but my 'Rambler' is pure wine."

The publication of several essays in "The Adventurer" a year later, or of "The Idler" in a weekly newspaper, six years after the conclusion of "The Rambler," do not call for notice, unless it be to point out that the satirical sketch of Dick Minim, the critic, in "The Idler," is more life-like than any character in "The Rambler," and that the final essay touches on Johnson's favourite theme, "the horror of the last," with a pathos all the more impressive from the unwonted simplicity of the language.

The secret horror of the last is inseparable from a thinking being whose life is limited and to whom death is dreadful. We always make a secret comparison between a part and the whole; the termination of any period of life reminds us that life itself has likewise its termination; when we have done anything for the last time we involuntarily reflect that a part of the days allotted us is past, and that as more are past there are less remaining.

It is very happily and kindly provided that in every life there are certain pauses and interruptions which force consideration upon the careless, and seriousness upon the light; points of time where one course of action ends and another begins; and by vicissitudes of fortune, or alteration of employment, by change of place or loss of friendship, we are forced to say of something—"this is the last."

In 1756 Soame Jenyns, a clever writer of the day—who is said to have won Burke's praise for the purity of his English, and whom Johnson credited for a wit—published "A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil;" the essay is based partly on Pope's "Essay on Man," but owes still more to the theories of a mind which delights to run riot in absurdities. To this essay Johnson wrote a brilliant reply in "The Literary Magazine," which has been praised by Macaulay as a masterpiece both of reasoning and of satirical pleasantry.

In a volume on "Wesley and Methodism," Isaac Taylor, in alluding to the well-known ghost at the Epworth Parsonage, suggests that there may be occult folk like "Jeffery," half-intelligent or idiotic, who have no liberty ordinarily to

intrigue in our world, but may sometimes escape from their boundary and "disport themselves among things palpable." Taylor suggests that these strange visitants can but perform feats of bootless mischief, and are harmless to do evil. Jenyns puts forth a far less innocent theory, and hints that some beings above us may be allowed to torment or destroy us for the ends only of their own pleasure or utility; a probability which, he observes, is strongly confirmed by analogy.

I cannot resist the temptation (says Johnson) of contemplating this analogy, which, I think, he might have carried further, very much to the advantage of his argument. He might have shown that these *hunters, whose game is man*, have many sports analogous to our own. As we drown whelps and kittens, they amuse themselves now and then with sinking a ship, and stand round the fields of Blenheim or the walls of Prague, as we encircle a cockpit. As we shoot a bird flying they take a man in the midst of his business or pleasure, and knock him down with an apoplexy. Some of them, perhaps, are virtuosi, and delight in the operations of an asthma, as a human philosopher in the effects of the air-pump. To swell a man with a tympany is as good sport as to blow a frog. Many a merry bout have these frolic beings at the vicissitudes of an ague, and good sport it is to see a man tumble with an epilepsy, and revive and tumble again, and all this he knows not why. As they are wiser and more powerful than we, they have more exquisite diversions, for we have no way of procuring any sport so brisk and so lasting as the paroxysms of the gout and stone, which undoubtedly must make high mirth, especially if the play be a little diversified with the

blunders and puzzles of the blind and deaf. We know not how far their sphere of observation may extend. Perhaps now and then a merry being may place himself in such a situation as to enjoy at once all the varieties of an epidemical disease, or amuse his leisure with the tossings and contortions of every possible pain exhibited together.

In the same satirical vein Johnson goes on to suggest that the merry malice of these beings may now and then catch a mortal proud of his parts, fill his head with idle notions, and make their plaything an author:

Then begins the poor animal to entangle himself in sophisms and flounder in absurdity, to talk confidently of the scale of being, and to give solutions which himself confesses impossible to be understood.

The essayists of the eighteenth century loved to disport themselves in allegory. Illustrations of Johnson's craft in this direction may be found in "The Rambler," but as he considered "Theodore the Hermit" (an allegory published in another periodical) one of the finest things he had written, it may claim attention here.

The stately solemnity of the opening passage is not likely to attract a modern reader:

Son of Perseverance, whoever thou art whose curiosity has led thee hither, read and be wise. He that now calls upon thee is Theodore the Hermit of Teneriffe, who in the fifty-seventh year of his retreat left this instruction to mankind lest his solitary hours should be spent in vain. I was once what thou art now, a groveller on the earth and a gazer at the sky. I trafficked and heaped wealth together; I loved

and was favoured; I wore the robe of honour, and heard the music of adulation; I was ambitious and rose to greatness; I was unhappy and retired."

Theodore beholds in a vision the Mountain of Existence, up which a nymph called Education leads a number of people, giving them good counsel at every step. After a while Education resigns her charge to Reason, who advises her pupils to enlist themselves among the votaries of religion; and gives them much wise advice, which in most cases is unheeded. The reader, after being conducted along the Road of Happiness and the Road of Reason, is warned against the peril of being ensnared by Habit; and after a review of other dangers, the allegory closes with a representation of victims who, having neglected Reason rather than disobeyed her, are lost in the maze of Indolence:

They wandered on from one double of the labyrinth to another, with the chains of Habit hanging secretly upon them, till, as they advanced, the flowers grew paler, and the scents fainter; they proceeded in their dreary march without pleasure in their progress, yet without power to return; and had this aggravation above all others, that they were criminal but not delighted. The drunkard for a time laughed over his wine; the ambitious man triumphed in the miscarriage of his rival; but the captives of Indolence had neither superiority nor merriment. Discontent lowered in their looks, and Sadness hovered round their shades; yet they crawled on reluctant and gloomy, till they arrived at the depth of the recess, varied only with poppies and nightshade, where the dominion of Indolence terminates, and the hopeless

wanderer is deliverd up to Melancholy ; the chains of Habit are rivetted for ever, and Melancholy, having tortured her prisoner for a time, consigns him at last to the cruelty of Despair.

Two allegories are the glory of our literature, yet the immortality of the "Faërie Queene" is not due to allegory, but to a great poet's teeming imagination, under the spell of which the form is forgotten, and how difficult, if not impossible, is it to think of John Bunyan's creations as allegorical in reading "The Pilgrim's Progress"! But Johnson's leaden abstractions have not life enough to stand upon their feet.

The "Tatler" and the "Spectator" are still delightful companions, and one would not willingly believe that Addison's best work will ever grow obsolete; Johnson as an essayist is more respected than loved. In his talk, which won golden opinions from all but the fastidious, he was eminently human, full of life, sympathy, and humour; when exercising his art as an essayist, the censor sometimes gets the better of the man. There are many thoughtful reflections in the "Rambler," and many wise counsels, but the solid pudding provided needs a stout digestion. Johnson's love of a Latinized vocabulary is conspicuous, and his hard words were said by the wags about town to have been concocted in order to make his Dictionary indispensable.

His next work, "Rasselas" (1759), was written by Johnson, as already stated, to defray the expenses of his mother's funeral. Tastes change, and it is to be feared that this sober narrative

is no longer read with the admiration Boswell deemed to be its due. The possibility would not occur to the biographer that a member of the famous club had in 1766 written a tale which after two centuries maintains its youthful freshness, and can boast a healthier wisdom than is to be found in "Rasselas." The story, however, if not a great work is written by a great man, and its interest depends chiefly on the personality of the writer. Johnson's sombre views of life had already been expressed in the "Vanity of Human Wishes," and in "Rasselas" he expatiates once more on the familiar theme. When a young man he had translated "Lobo's Voyage to Abyssinia," and this fact no doubt led him to choose Abyssinia for the site of his romance. Any out-of-the-world place would have sufficed, for there is no attempt at local colouring. Rasselas, a royal prince, has been brought up according to custom in a Happy Valley, where he has all the luxuries and enjoyments of life, with the exception, that until called to the throne, he is not permitted to leave it. He is discontented, as it was inevitable he should be, with his splendid and spacious prison, and accompanied by his sister, and by Imlac, a wise and, indeed, a model man, escapes from it to see the world. The search after happiness proves unavailing; and the book closes with the return of Rasselas and his companions to the valley they had been so eager to leave. The characters are not creations, but may be regarded as lay figures, or as breaks in a discourse which would

prove wearisome without them. The narrative has the salt of humour and the saving grace of sincerity. No one ever believed more firmly in the vanity of human wishes than the author of "Rasselas."

Two characteristic passages may be quoted from a book which has long ceased to be popular. The youthful prince, in his eagerness for knowledge, listens to the experiences of a poet, and then of a philosopher.

In the first passage his companion Imlac is the speaker:

"Being now resolved to be a poet, I saw everything with a new purpose; my sphere of attention was suddenly magnified; no kind of knowledge was to be overlooked. I ranged mountains and deserts for images and resemblances, and pictured upon my mind every tree of the forest and flower of the valley. I observed with equal care the crags of the rock and the pinnacles of the palace. Sometimes I wandered along the mazes of the rivulet, and sometimes watched the changes of the summer clouds. To a poet nothing can be useless. Whatever is beautiful and whatever is dreadful, must be familiar to his imagination; he must be conversant with all that is awfully vast or elegantly little. But the knowledge of nature is only half the task of a poet: he must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition, observe the power of all the passions in all their combinations, and trace the changes of the human mind as they are modified by various institutions, and accidental influences of climate or custom, from the sprightliness of infancy, to the despondence of

decrepitude. He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age and country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same. He must therefore content himself with the slow progress of his name, condemn the applause of his own time, and commit his claims to the justice of posterity. He must write as the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as a being superior to time and place.

“His labour is not yet at an end; he must know many languages and many sciences; and that his style may be worthy of his thoughts, must, by incessant practice, familiarize to himself every delicacy of speech and grace of harmony.”

Imlac now felt the enthusiastic fit, and was proceeding to aggrandize his own profession, when the prince cried out, “Enough! thou hast convinced me that no human being can ever be a poet.”

Rasselas is not more fortunate in his visit to the philosopher:

“Sir,” said the prince with great modesty, “as I, like all the rest of mankind, am desirous of felicity, my closest attention has been fixed upon your discourse; I doubt not the truth of a position which a man so learned has so confidently advanced: let me only know what it is to live according to nature.”

“When I find young men so humble and so docile,” said the philosopher, “I can deny them no information which my studies have enabled me to afford.—To live according to nature, is to act always with due regard to the fitness arising from the relations and qualities of causes and effects; to

concur with the great and unchangeable scheme of universal felicity; to co-operate with the general disposition and tendency of the present system of things."

The prince soon found that this was one of the sages whom he should understand less as he heard him longer. He therefore bowed and was silent; and the philosopher, supposing him satisfied, and the rest vanquished, rose up, and departed with the air of a man that had co-operated with the present system.

In 1765 Johnson, after long delay, completed his edition of "Shakespeare" in eight volumes; he did little towards improving the text, and the immeasurable superiority of Coleridge and Hazlitt as Shakesperian critics, and the splendid work done for the poet in Germany, have thrown into the shade the aesthetic judgement of all earlier commentators. The antagonism of the poet's editors is familiar to students. Johnson, with the good sense that prevented him from answering attacks upon himself or on his writings, keeps clear of controversy, as far as that is possible, on this difficult field. "There is often," he says, "found in commentators a spontaneous strain of invective and contempt more eager and venomous than is vented by the most spurious controversialist in politics against those whom he is hired to defame." His preface, a manly piece of writing, is in advance of the age in which it was written. There is, he observes, always an appeal from criticism to nature, and with this text as his guide he brushes away many objections of the earlier critics. Writing in "Johnsonese," he says:

"I have reserved many lines from the violations of temerity, and secured many scenes from the inroads of correction." He defends Shakespeare for his disregard of the unities, and for blending comedy with tragedy, but oddly enough declares him to be a master chiefly in comedy :

In tragedy his performance seems constantly to be worse as his labour is more. The effusions of passion which exigence forces out, are for the most part striking and energetic ; but whenever he solicits his invention or strains his faculties, the offspring of his throes is tumour, meanness, tediousness, and obscurity.

After this amazing judgement it seems difficult to credit Johnson's sanity as a Shakesperian critic ; but in his judgement of particular tragedies he shows himself in a measure alive to their greatness, and if unable to rise to the poet's high argument, he arrests attention by the shrewdness and solidity of his remarks while travelling on less elevated ground. He would not be Johnson if he did not discover that the poet is more anxious to please than to instruct, and appears to write without any moral purpose :

He makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked. . . . this fault the barbarity of his age cannot extenuate, for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better.

Johnson apparently thought that to every work of imagination a moral ought to be tacked, like

It is a new thing for a Clerk of the India-house
to remplate Books. It is new for a Governor of Bengal
to subscribe for a new edition of a book. It is new for a
Governor of Bengal to subscribe for a new edition of a book.
It is new for a Governor of Bengal to subscribe for a new
edition of a book. It is new for a Governor of Bengal to
subscribe for a new edition of a book. It is new for a
Governor of Bengal to subscribe for a new edition of a book.

Your most humble servant,

Sam: Johnson

Jan. 29. 1781

[British Museum.

PART OF A LETTER TO WARREN HASTINGS, GOVERNOR OF BENGAL,

SOLICITING HIS SUPPORT FOR A TRANSLATION OF ARIOSTO BY JOHN HOOLE. 29 JANUARY, 1781.

a tail to a kite, and this belief infects all his criticism of poetry. He failed to see that imaginative art teaches indirectly, and that in his far-seeing representation of life, Shakespeare is a profound teacher as well as an imperial poet.

Of Johnson as a political pamphleteer it will suffice to say that he failed, as the ablest writer must who deals with a subject about which he has little to guide him beyond the prejudice due to ignorance. To defend the folly which led to American independence was no easy task, and Johnson's strength failed him in the effort. "Taxation no Tyranny" is as dead as the cause it advocated; and even Boswell, who too often magnifies his master indiscriminately, declares, that "positive assertion, sarcastical severity, and extravagant ridicule are united in this rhapsody."

A few words must be said with reference to the publication of the "Prayers and Meditations," which Johnson, with his characteristic lack of sensitiveness, allowed to be published after his death. The "Meditations" cover a period of more than forty-five years, and express, without restraint, his spiritual anxieties. The sincerity of the writer cannot be questioned; he does not spare himself nor attempt to conceal his wayward thoughts and superstitions. His faults, his resolutions, his regrets at failure are all noted down with a minuteness of detail that would be wearisome, were it not that they reveal, as nothing else which he has published can, the fears and struggles of the writer. Johnson had a full

perception of his intellectual greatness, but when placing himself in the Great Taskmaster's eye, he acknowledged his frailty, as every sincere and thoughtful man must.

“THE LIVES OF THE POETS”

IN our days the tendency of literary criticism is to ignore morality altogether: Art, it is asserted, has a world of its own, in which there is no room for the pedestrian footsteps of the moralist. Is an imaginative work beautiful in conception and execution? then, whatever be its tendency, the critic must pronounce it good. That Winckelmann, for example, joined the Roman Catholic Church, not from conviction, but from convenience as an artist, has been said by a distinguished critic to more than absolve him at the bar of the highest criticism. To exalt art at the expense of morality is too often the error in our time; Johnson, on the contrary, and the critics of the eighteenth century, if they did not exactly ask what a poem proved, never failed to expect and to seek for a moral purpose in the poet.

“The Lives of the Poets” (which should be read with notes, for the biographer is often inaccurate in dates and facts), begins with the birth of Cowley in 1618, and ends with the death of Lord Lyttelton in 1773, a period of little more than a century and a half. With the whole time Johnson had a wide acquaintance, and apart from the value of his criticism, he relates much not readily

to be found elsewhere. And it is no small boon to gain our knowledge from a man of letters so richly endowed, and living as it were in the centre of the age of which he is the historian.

The "Lives" may, therefore, be said to represent the high-water mark of criticism at that period. There were men, indeed, who rebelled against the lexicographer's authority as a poetical dictator, as there always will be dissenters from the established faith. "Oh! I could thrash his old jacket till I made his pension jingle in his pocket," was the cry of Cowper, upon reading his judgement of "Paradise Lost"; but Johnson expressed the mind of the time, and did it with a force that makes his comments interesting still.

Within his own range his criticism is excellent. If he sneered at Milton's "Sonnets," treated "Lycidas" with contempt, and found "Comus" tediously instructive; if he failed to appreciate the lyric genius of Collins, and could find nothing in Gray to praise save the "Elegy"; he is a masterly critic of Cowley, Dryden, and Pope; and there is not a poet or verse-man named in the "Lives" who does not suggest to his biographer some weighty thought or felicitous illustration. The insignificance of the subject was indeed no barrier to Johnson, and many of his happiest passages will be found in the account of men whose names live only in his pages. And it may be observed, that at no period of our literary history were there so many poetasters as in the years which separate Dryden from Johnson, for verse-making was as much the disease

of men of letters in that age, as the making of dramas was in the Elizabethan age, or as novel writing is in ours.

The vigour of the work will dispose the reader to tolerate many deficiencies ; Johnson lives in these “Lives,” and speaks to us like a man to men, with far greater ease than in his more didactic performances. Perverse prejudices are not infrequent ; he dearly loved a good hater, and what he did not love he hated. He may be mistaken, but he is never feeble ; he is sometimes intolerant, but he is always sincere. “A mere man of letters,” he once said, “is a dull man ;” Johnson, who knew the world, and loved men even better than books, is rarely dull, unless it be when as a moralizer he protests too much, or when venturing into the perilous field of allegory. A fine criticism may prove an intellectual feast and create a pleasure somewhat akin to that which we gain from the poets themselves. It may be questioned whether any criticism by Johnson gives (to use a phrase of his own) “this turbulent delight.” His critical faculty was powerful and fearless : he had large stores of knowledge, and a splendid memory from which to draw illustrations, yet his criticisms do not kindle the imagination, and we read them chiefly for their personal and historical interest. Probably the secret of this deficiency is due to the writer’s inability to discriminate between the soul of poetry and the technicalities of verse. He was fettered by rules, and failed to see that a great poet breaks new ground, and is a law to

himself, which the critic must study and interpret. Johnson observes that until Dryden's time there was no poetical diction, no system of words at once refined from the grossness of domestic use, and free from the harshness of terms appropriated to particular arts. To this the reply seems obvious, that if before Dryden's time there had been no system of words set apart for poetry, the need of such an artificial aid was not felt. Neither Spenser nor Milton required "examples of composition for the establishment of regularity and the introduction of propriety in word and thought." Not thus are great poets built up! What a servile study of poetic diction accomplished after Dryden's death, the poetry of the eighteenth century reveals; how great an effort was needed to cast off its shackles is seen in the poetry and criticism of a later age.

The first biography of the series gives the author scope for criticism of a kind for which he is eminently fitted. No English poet rising to the height of Cowley has been destined after a brief and brilliant period to fall so low. "Who now reads Cowley?" was a question asked by Pope; and it may be asked still. Many a verse-man, with but a small claim to the title of poet, has displayed the momentary splendour of a skyrocket, and then shared its fate; but Cowley was a poet, and may be said to have died by his own hand. His wit, as was frequently the case also with Donne, overpowered his poetry. In an interesting essay on "Mixed Wit" in the "Spectator," Addison had given illustrations of Cowley's frigid

conceits ; Johnson with his robust good sense treats the subject more fully, and attacks under the unhappy title of “Metaphysical Poets”—for metaphysical, as Dr. Masson has pointed out, is simply supernatural—Donne and Cleveland, as well as Cowley. The criticism exposes a school of conceits which at one time debased both our verse and prose ; it died out, as every kind of literary affectation must, but not without leaving its mark on much of our seventeenth century literature. Even Milton in his youthful days did not wholly escape from the taint. In every age literature has foibles not always detected at the time, and the deficiencies of his contemporaries were imperfectly seen by Johnson ; but no man could have exposed more clearly than he has done the faults which the taste of an earlier age had regarded as merits.

His “Life of Cowley” is full of instruction for students of literature, and it is free from what, to use a mild phrase, may be termed his critical idiosyncrasies. Moreover, there are few of the big words for which he was credited, as he himself acknowledged, with Gargantua’s mouth. It would be difficult, for example, to describe the fantastic folly of Cowley’s love poetry with more truthfulness and precision than in the following passage:

Cowley’s “Mistress” has no power of seduction, “she plays round the head, but comes not at the heart.” Her beauty and absence, her kindness and cruelty, her disdain and inconstancy, produce no correspondence of emotion. His poetical account

of the virtues of plants and colours of flowers is not perused with more sluggish frigidity. The compositions are such as might have been written for penance by a hermit, or for hire by a philosophical rhymer who had only heard of another sex; for they turn the mind only on the writer, whom, without thinking on a woman but as the subject for his talk, we sometimes esteem as learned, and sometimes despise as trifling, always admire as ingenious, and always condemn as unnatural.

As Johnson considers his Cowley the best of the "Lives," it may be well to linger over it a little longer. Several pages are expended in illustration of the false art which in Cowley's age was mistaken for poetry. The poets endeavoured to excite wonder by the singularity of their thoughts; the imagery was worthless if not grotesque, and the one evil to be shunned was simplicity. Of this "race of authors," Johnson writes:

The most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together; nature and art are ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions; their learning instructs, and their subtlety surprises; but the reader commonly thinks his improvement dearly bought, and though he sometimes admires is seldom pleased.

Language, according to Johnson, is the dress of thought, a definition to which Wordsworth objected: it ought, he said, to be called "the incarnation of thought;" and he would have been unwilling to accept the additional statement that "the most splendid ideas drop their magnificence if they are conveyed by words used commonly upon low and trivial occasions." It may be

observed that the poet when he has his singing robes upon him is not wholly master of his words, and that it is as idle a task to search after simplicity on the one hand, as to labour in the production of what the taste of the age may regard as poetical diction, on the other. Johnson complains that Cowley “makes no selection of words, nor seeks any neatness of phrase, he has no elegancies either lucky or elaborate.” We should not use such expressions in the present day, for neatness of phrase and elaborate elegancies are not the gifts we seek from a poet; but the critic’s meaning is evident from the context, and he is right in saying that Cowley too often fails to charm, and irritates the reader by his want of taste. “It would be difficult,” as Hallam observes, “to fix on any one poem in which the beauties are more frequent than the blemishes.”

Among the “Lives,” one of the most important and least satisfactory, is the biography of Milton. No two men could have had less in sympathy than the critic and the poet, and it was inevitable that Johnson should have some plain words to say about the defender of regicides, the opposer of Church as well as State, and the holder of loose views upon matrimony. He does not spare his sarcasms when recording the poet’s life, and Milton, both as a man and a controvertialist, is open to criticism from a loyalist and churchman. The judgement passed by Johnson on much of his poetry, were it not generally familiar, would excite the attraction created by surprise.

To be told that to admire his “little pieces”

is false approbation, that there is no nature, no truth, no art, in the unpleasing numbers of "Lycidas"; that Comus," though "truly poetical," is "inelegantly splendid and tediously instructive," and that the Sonnets deserve not any particular criticism, for of the best it can only be said that they are not bad—is to strike at the root of our poetical creed. After these pronouncements it is some relief to find that the critic has much generous appreciation for "Paradise Lost," but the lover whom Milton has enthralled will not willingly read that the perusal of this great poem is a duty rather than a pleasure, that "we read Milton for instruction and look elsewhere for recreation; we desert our master and seek for companions." "Was there ever anything so delightful," writes Cowper, "as the music of 'Paradise Lost?'" but for that music Johnson had no ear, and in his judgement blank verse, not excepting Milton's, "has neither the easiness of prose nor the melody of numbers, and therefore tires by long continuance." Yet that Johnson had an exalted estimate of Milton's greatness is proved by the following noble appeal to the public on behalf of the poet's indigent grandchild. After stating that the poor woman and her husband kept a little chandler's shop, near Shoreditch Church, the writer adds:

That this relation is true cannot be questioned: but, surely, the honour of letters, the dignity of sacred poetry, the spirit of the English nation, and the glory of human nature require—that it should be true no longer. In an age in which statues are erected

to the honour of this great writer, in which his effigy has been diffused on medals, and his works propagated by translations, and illustrated by commentaries ; in an age which, amidst all its vices and all its follies, has not become infamous for want of charity, it may be, surely, allowed to hope that the living remains of Milton will be no longer suffered to languish in distress. It is yet in the power of a great people to reward the poet whose name they boast, and from their alliance to whose genius they claim some kind of superiority to every other nation of the earth ; that poet, whose works may possibly be read when every other monument of British greatness shall be obliterated ; to reward him—not with pictures or with medals, which if he sees he sees with contempt, but—with tokens of gratitude, which he, perhaps, may even now consider as not unworthy the regard of an immortal spirit. And, surely, to those who refuse their names to no other scheme of expense, it will not be unwelcome that a *subscription* is proposed for relieving in the languor of age, the pains of disease, and the contempt of poverty, the grand-daughter of the author of “Paradise Lost.”

To the Lives of Dryden and Pope it would be impossible to do justice in this brief survey. Johnson not only writes with knowledge and judgement, but with the generous admiration of a critic whose task had been formed in what, despite the eloquent protest of Landor, must be called their *school*. In these elaborate criticisms there are judgements more acceptable to his own age than to ours, but this divergence makes them none the less interesting. Johnson never wrote with more zest than in this criticism, nor with

more acumen, and, as the arch-critic of his age, he has, as Professor Hales points out, spoken with its voice.

In the character of Pope, as delineated by Johnson, there are traits which the biographer must have regarded with the utmost aversion. At first sight it might seem that no two men of letters could afford a stronger contrast than the sturdy lexicographer of Bolt Court and the delicate cripple of Twickenham. Yet there are points of resemblance between them which it may be worth while to notice. Pope and Johnson were the two chief representatives of English literature in the eighteenth century, and the supremacy of the poet was as incontestible in 1735 as Dr. Johnson's was in 1765. Both, though in different ways, were literary gladiators, men of war from their youth, who loved fighting for fighting's sake; both rose from an humble origin to a high social position by dint of genius and hard labour; both were regarded as dictators, and both—not altogether without reason—formed a butt for the lampooners of Grub Street; both were intimate associates of the first men of the day—Swift and Gay, Arbuthnot and Atterbury, Bolingbroke and Peterborough, were proud to call Pope friend. And Johnson, as we all know, was revered as well as loved by Burke and Goldsmith, by Reynolds and Garrick. In breadth of intellect Swift was superior to Pope, and Burke to Johnson, yet the reputation of these great men never interfered with the literary pre-eminence of their friends. Both Pope and Johnson were ardent lovers

of knowledge, and followed it under difficulties which would have crushed less heroic spirits; both suffered throughout life from painful bodily maladies; and the works of the poet and the moralist produced swarms of imitators, who, on catching Pope's knack of rhyming and Johnson's high-sounding periods, forgot that they lacked the wit of the one and the masterful sagacity of the other.

If, as Johnson says, good sense is the fundamental principle of Pope, it was so also of his biographer, yet the difference between the two men morally and intellectually is, it need scarcely be said, infinitely greater than their points of similarity. Both Pope and Dryden, according to Johnson, excelled in prose; but it is impossible to agree with that judgement. Pope's prose style is seen in his letters, Dryden's in his prefaces and essays. The letters, as we know, were written for effect and for publication, and have all the vices of such a correspondence; in Dryden there is a conversational charm, a purity and strength which perhaps entitle him to be called the father of our modern prose.

It may indeed be questioned whether any poet has wielded prose with greater ease. If style, which belongs as much to an author as his thoughts, ought to be imitated or can be, then we should be inclined to traverse Johnson's familiar saying about Addison and to apply it to Dryden instead. No matter upon what subject the poet writes, or what views he takes, everywhere we find the same perspicacity, the same

energy, the same purity of idiom—qualities which make even his fulsome dedications not unprofitable reading. Little, probably, did Dryden surmise that his critical prefaces and apologies would prove more attractive than the plays to which they are attached, but so it is. The loss of all save three or four of the dramas would be no serious deprivation to literature, but the loss of the comments that accompany them would be irreparable.

Among the "Lives of the Poets" Mr. Arnold selected six as of pre-eminent interest, with the remark, that in the lives of Milton, Dryden, Swift, Addison, Pope, and Gray we have the "very kernel and quintessence" of the work. He admits, however, that we might have hoped for a better life of Gray; it would have been more accurate to say, that considering the importance of the subject, it is the worst of the series. Gray, it is needless to remark, was a contemporary, and Johnson did not like him. "Sir," he said one night at Streatham, "he was dull in company, dull in his closet, dull everywhere; he was dull in a new way, and that made many people think him great." And Gray, although he praises his "London," could not abide Johnson. Without sympathy there can be no true literary judgment, and Johnson's criticism of "the Wonderful Wonder of Wonders the two Sister Odes," shows his incapacity for appreciating, or his unwillingness to admire them.

Gray, it is said, declined to meet Johnson, and the "Life" therefore lacks the attraction of

personal acquaintance. With Collins, the rival of Gray, if not his superior as a lyric poet, Johnson was familiar, and after describing a few incidents in his sad life, he adds, “he was a man with whom I once delighted to converse, and still remember with tenderness.” Of the high position of Collins among the poets of his country he does not seem to have a perception, and concludes his critical estimate with the following decision:

His diction was often harsh, unskilfully laboured and injudiciously selected. He affected the obsolete when it was not worthy of revival; and he puts his words out of the common order, seeming to think, with some later candidates for fame, that not to write prose is certainly to write poetry. His lines commonly are of slow motion, clogged and impeded with clusters of consonants. As men are often esteemed who cannot be loved, so the poetry of Collins may sometimes extort praise when it gives little pleasure.

The elaborate biography of Savage, written, as already stated, many years before, fills a space wholly out of proportion to his claims as a poet. Why, it might be asked, should as many pages be allotted to a contemptible versifier as to John Milton? But Savage had been Johnson’s comrade, and it may be hoped that his friendship, and not his judgement, led him to write that the prevailing beauty of that writer’s style was sublimity. Strange, too, is the lenity with which the moral character of the poetaster is treated, for the vices of Savage were such as in another man would

have won no tolerance from the biographer. In the greatest stress of his London life Johnson preserved his integrity; Savage at no period of his career displayed a sense of honour, and was ready to cheat friend and foe alike. An adept in making promises, it never occurred to him to keep them; and those who sympathized most with his strange lot, found at last that to help him was impossible. Johnson admits that he was "the slave of every passion that happened to be excited by the presence of its object; that he appeared to think himself born to be supported by others, and that his friendship was of little value as it was always dangerous to trust him." In his final paragraph Johnson points a moral; but surely no man so contemptible was ever deemed worthy of an admirably written biography to enforce it.

In his criticisms of the poets Johnson's praise and blame are somewhat strangely awarded. The assertion which excited the wrath of John Wesley, that Prior's "Solomon" is a tedious poem, will not be contested by the modern reader, for that pretentious work is now as dead as Sir Richard Blackmore's epics; but Johnson failed to discover the charm of Prior as a writer of occasional verses, and even asserts that "his numbers commonly want airiness, lightness and felicity;" the very qualities for which his genius is distinguished.

The "Lives" exhibit more vividly, perhaps, than any other work of the century, the vanity, if not the glory, of literature. Already it has been asked with Pope: "Who now reads Cowley?"

“The name of the great author of ‘Hudibras,’” says Johnson, “can only perish with the language;” but “Hudibras” has now few readers who are not also students. “Perhaps,” he writes again, “no composition of our language has been oftener perused than Pomfret’s ‘Choice;’” but that poem, which carried the author’s volume through several editions, can no longer claim a reader. And what do we know of Roscommon, with his “spritely verses?” of Dorset, whom Dryden called superior to the ancients in satire? of Walsh, who lives, if he have life at all, in the praise of Pope? of Blackmore, who can at least claim to be one of the most voluminous verse-makers in the language? of King, and Duke; of Mallet and Hughes? or even of that *great work*, “The Pleasures of Imagination?” Time spares neither poets nor prose writers; and a rare genius is now needed to carry a man’s name bravely for even half a century.

“The house” (of fame), says Swift, “is so full that there is no room for above one or two, at most, in an age, through the whole world.” This, however, is not the final word; the thoughts of great writers live after their works are forgotten, and the world, while neglecting its masters, grows the better by their teaching.

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